

DISCUSSION LEADERS' handbook

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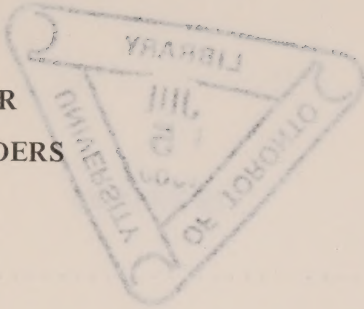


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A HANDBOOK FOR
DISCUSSION LEADERS

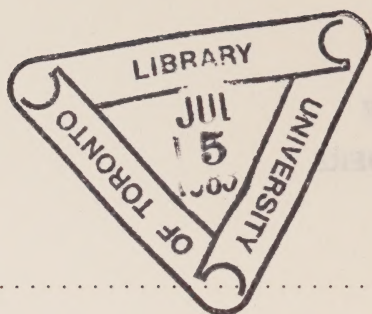


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FOREWORD

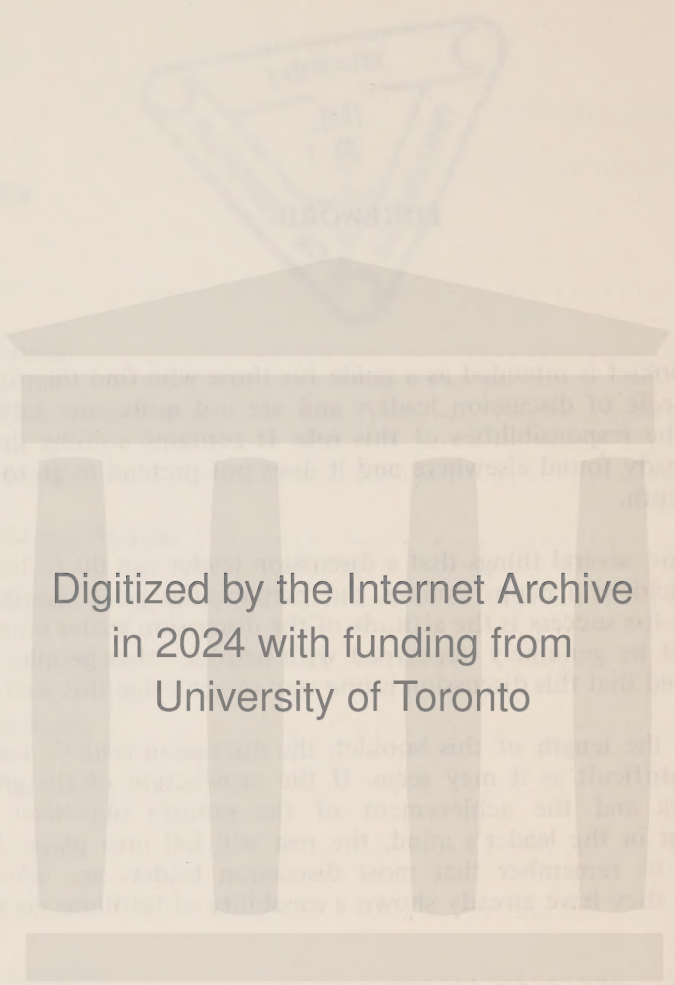
This booklet is intended as a guide for those who find themselves in the role of discussion leaders and are not quite sure how to fulfill the responsibilities of this role. It contains nothing that is not already found elsewhere and it does not pretend to go to any great depth.

There are several things that a discussion leader can do to help a group achieve a happy ending, but perhaps the most significant variable for success is the attitude of the discussion leader himself. He must be genuinely concerned with helping other people, and convinced that this discussion is one way of achieving this goal.

Despite the length of this booklet, the discussion leader's task is not as difficult as it may seem. If the satisfaction of the group members and the achievement of the group's objectives are foremost in the leader's mind, the rest will fall into place. It is helpful to remember that most discussion leaders are selected because they have already shown a capability of fulfilling the task at hand.

One other thing to keep in mind is that a discussion group always has a specific task at hand — achieving solid conclusions on a particular subject in a specific period of time. It is not a sensitivity group, nor is it a platform for one particular point of view.

Good luck in your new responsibilities — may your conclusions be valid and the participants satisfied.



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A HANDBOOK FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS

THE DISCUSSION GROUP

‘Truth is never pure, and rarely simple’

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I

In the 20th century we have seen major changes come about in our knowledge of how and why people learn as well as a major redefinition of what learning is. We have found, for instance, that people learn more quickly when they are personally involved in the process of learning and when they feel that the subject vitally affects them. Participation has become the keyword.

Out of this concept of participatory learning several methods of providing a learning experience have evolved. One of these – the discussion group – is the one which we are going to examine in fuller detail. Even more specifically, we are going to look at your role, as discussion leader, in helping the participants achieve their own objectives.

Unfortunately, we must start out with warnings. The discussion group has become a popular, and, in many cases, a successful method of achieving the goals set out for it. So has aspirin. And like aspirin the discussion group is specific in its aim and completely inadequate for other problems. We would not use aspirin to treat a broken leg, nor should we use the discussion group in the place of those better ways to transmit specific information and enhance learning.

Also, it must be borne in mind that the discussion technique is just that, a technique. The discussion group is not an end in itself but

merely a method to help people learn. However, a good discussion group can help people to expand their horizons and achieve a sense of personal satisfaction. We hope to give you some of the tools necessary to achieve this goal.

The discussion group is a laboratory for the exchange of ideas for all persons in the group. It is, therefore, used when the subject to be discussed is one in which all the participants have interest, knowledge and feelings. Participants pool ideas, knowledge and experience to arrive at group decisions.

When this common background is not present, the group is in danger of pooling its ignorance. If only a limited number of persons have the necessary knowledge, the lecture, forum or panel would probably be a better or more appropriate method of transmitting it.

The topic should also be relevant to members of the group to ensure a high degree of group participation. If several discussion groups are provided to deal with specific questions around a larger topic, participants will have an opportunity to select the one most pertinent to themselves. For example, the organizers of a horticultural conference could set up groups to deal with a variety of sub-topics such as perennial plants, trees, and African violets.

The topic cannot be too limited or discussion will be stilted and inhibited as the group struggles to expand its discussion to fill the time available. On the other hand, it must be specific enough that some decisions can be reached. If the topic is too broad a sense of frustration can set in as the group becomes overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all.

Organizers should also make sure that the time set aside for the discussion groups is appropriate to the subject to be covered. Too little time often means that all participants can't have their say, conclusions reached are hasty and based on inadequate discussion and people feel rushed. If the period is too long, on the other hand, the discussion may limp and boredom may quickly set in.

Remember

- . discussion groups are a technique
- . the topic should be relevant and suitable for discussion
- . the time set aside should be adequate for thorough discussion

THE SETTING

'This must my comforts be
The sun that warms you here shall shine on me'
Richard II, Act I, Scene iii

If we may paraphrase Shakespeare, we may truly say of the discussion leader 'one man in his time plays many parts'. He directs the flow of discussion, introduces facts, involves people, and summarizes. Too often though he neglects one important aspect that, when lacking, can effectively destroy the group – the physical and emotional comfort of the members themselves.

Physical Comfort

When we refer to physical comfort we are talking about those conditions which enable a person to be able to concentrate on the subject at hand, instead of continually trying to become more comfortable. The following are some of the questions a leader should consider before the session starts:

- . Is the room adequately ventilated?
- . Is the temperature right?
- . Is there good lighting?
- . Are the chairs comfortable?
- . If smoking is allowed, are ashtrays provided?
- . Can all members be seated in such a way that they can see each other without turning around?

The last question is very important because for a free and easy interchange within a group, people must be able to see one another. If they cannot, barriers to effective communication are set up.

Emotional Comfort

Another element that is often omitted in a discussion of comfort in discussion groups is that of the emotional setting. It is here that the leader has a definite and positive role to play while the discussion group is underway. If this is ignored, no amount of expertise can make the discussion group achieve its objectives.

For a member to participate fully in a discussion group he must feel that he, and his comments, have some worth to the total group. This feeling is developed right from the beginning when he is welcomed into the group and introductions are made. He should not be left to sink or swim, but should be made to feel that he will be an important part of the group's life. The atmosphere should be

one in which participants feel free to say what they feel about the subject under discussion. They must know that disagreements with their ideas, is not a personal attack.

Remember

comfort is not only physical, it is also emotional.

GROUP PROCESS

'And he smiled a kind of sickly smile, and curled upon the floor
And the subsequent proceedings interested him no more'.

Bret Harte, **The Society upon the Stanislaus**

It is vital that we recognize the fact that discussion groups usually do not arrive at a decision by chance. It begins at the beginning and ends at the end by following a series of steps that are common to almost all groups. It is no accident when sound decisions are reached.

The steps are not always clearly defined but the discussion leader should always be aware of where the group is and where it is going. It is his task to help the group define its objectives and then to reach them. He is much like a hired fishing guide saying things like 'So you want bass, trout or pike?' 'How long are you prepared to spend at it?' 'How hard do you want to work?' 'Perhaps you should cast over there.' 'You reel it in and I'll help you net it'.

Group Stages

The steps mentioned below are merely indicative of the general stages a group passes through. Like a road map they show the route that is being followed but not the hills and valleys or other terrain. However, they do show a logical pattern of progression.

Recognize the Problem

- if a problem does not exist, why bother?
- agree on what is to be discussed
- agree that it is relevant to the group

Examine the Problem

- the problem should be defined clearly enough to be able to exchange ideas and information
- the scope of the problem should be understood

Look at the Facts

- What is real and what is fiction?
- discuss problems thoroughly and systematically
- diagnose why problems occur

Propose Tentative Decisions

- based on the facts brought forward, what steps can be taken to remedy the problems

Select Suitable Decisions

- get general agreement on the most appropriate method of dealing with the problems

After this process has been followed and completed, the leader should take time to find out if all persons are satisfied with the decisions that have been reached.

The Recorder

Although later in this pamphlet we will be talking about the specific things the discussion leader and the members can do to help the group move along, there is one important person who should be mentioned. This is the recorder or for lack of a better word, the note taker.

The recorder has a very important role to play in the group. Appointed either before the group is formed or at the beginning of the session he serves as the historian — noting the important points of the discussion.

At various times during the session, he can remind the group of what has been discussed, what suggestions have been made and what decisions have been reached. At the end of the session he can briefly summarize what has happened. Often he may be called upon to give a report on a group's discussion either to a larger conference or in writing and to summarize its conclusions.

Thus a group should not pick a recorder casually (like 'She's the only woman here' or 'He has a pencil in his hand') but should look for some specific qualities. These would include

- an ability to select important points of discussion
- an ability to accurately reflect the feelings and opinions of the group
- a willingness to do the job

Remember

- . a sound discussion is no accident
- . a discussion group passes through certain stages and they should be recognized
- . a good recorder is important to the group

THE DISCUSSION LEADER

'Whatever this is that I am, it is a little
flesh and breath, and the ruling part'

Marcus Aurelius Antonius *Meditations* II.2

In these pages we are attempting to give you, the discussion leader, an idea of some of the things that you might do to help the group arrive at sound decisions. However, in many cases these are technical points and we do not wish to ignore the very important role played by the personal qualities and behavior of the leader.

The discussion leader must work in such a way that he encourages all the other members to express their opinions while remaining studiously neutral himself. This is often a very difficult assignment. Leaders are often selected because they hold strong opinions and have the ability to articulate them.

Personal Qualities

It behooves us now to look at some of the qualities desirable in a

discussion leader. It is indeed a rare man who possesses all these qualities to their fullest extent. However, these points can be used to frame a picture of such a person. He is

Friendly

- the type of person group members will respond to

Fair but firm

- neutral in approach

An Attentive Listener

- hearing not only the words that are spoken but what the speaker is really trying to say

Patient

- participants must be allowed to clearly understand what is being said even if it slows down the progress of the group and those who are not articulate must be allowed to state their ideas

Clear Thinking

- has the ability to summarize and correlate the various points of view

Unaggressive

- the leader does not push his own opinions

Sensitive

- must be aware of the feeling of group members
- should be aware when group consensus is reached

Aware of the Value of Discussion

- the leader should be confident that the group process is a sound way to reach a decision

These then are some of the personal qualities that a discussion leader brings to the group. He is now ready to begin functioning in the particular role he has accepted. There are many things that a discussion leader can do to help the group move along towards its objective and we will deal with these next. However, it should be kept in mind that the ability to sense what is required of the leader in a certain situation comes basically through experience. We are only attempting to provide the framework for you, not make you an expert.

The Role of the Leader

The following are some of the things a discussion leader can do to help the group in its examination of the topic and development of solutions.

Comes Prepared

— the leader should learn as much as possible about the subject to be discussed before the group starts. This implies the gathering of facts from a variety of sources — newspapers, radio and TV, press, etc. If there is anything really pertinent to the group discussion that can be readily reproduced, copies might be given to the members. The leader, if he has any way of contacting the members beforehand, might suggest suitable readings.

Gets Discussion Started

— the beginning of a discussion group must be very carefully planned, especially if the participants are unknown to each other. There are two potential dangers:

- 1) that people may be hesitant about starting to talk
- 2) that discussion starts off topic

There are several things that a leader can do to help the group get off the ground

- 1) If the group is small enough he can have everyone introduce himself.
- 2) Have the participants list the major points they wish to discuss.
- 3) Clarify the topic so that all the participants have a clear idea of what is to be discussed.

Helps Group Reach Conclusions

There are a variety of different purposes for discussion groups:

- defining problems and needs
- planning programs
- evaluating programs
- raising questions to be answered later

and a vast number of other purposes. No matter what the reason for its existence, however, a discussion group follows a series of steps to reach its conclusion. The discussion leader acts as a guide for the group as it moves through this process. He sees the goal, anticipates pitfalls, warns when the wrong trail is taken, and achieves satisfaction when the group achieves its target. He must always be careful though that he does not direct the discussion and if the group decides it wants to go somewhere else — so be it!

The leader performs numerous tasks throughout the discussion. It would be impossible (and unnecessary) to enumerate them all but there are several that are crucial. These include:

- . keeping group on topic
- . encouraging individual opinions
- . making sure that the group has a clear understanding of discussion
- . encouraging friendly understanding
- . summarizing occasionally
- . indicating when and how discussion strays
- . helping avoid misunderstanding among participants where they agree and where they disagree
- . encouraging systematic methods and the use of facts
- . providing whatever information he can about the topics being discussed
- . indicating when agreement has been reached

When all is said and done the best indication of a job well done is a decision reached that provides satisfaction for all the members of the group.

Remember

- . the personal qualities of a leader are as important as what he does
- . the leader's role is to help the group achieve sound and satisfying conclusions

MEMBERS' ROLES

'Multitudes in the Valley of Decision'

Bible, Joel 3:14

Members have the most important roles to play in a discussion group. The way they participate and the tasks they perform will

ultimately effect the decision that they reach. At the end of this paper is an appendix listing what are called the FUNCTIONAL ROLES and NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR of group members. These may be categorized as helpful and non-helpful activities of members in aiding the group to reach its objectives.

Although we are not dealing with members' non-functional behaviour directly, it can be said that this usually occurs because the conditions suggested earlier were not met.

- the room is too hot
- the topic is of no interest
- the participant has been made to feel that his ideas have no value.

The functional roles that a member plays are those that help the group achieve its objectives and help the group members achieve a feeling of satisfaction. Among the major such roles are:

- stating the issue clearly
- asking for information
- giving information
- arbitrating
- evaluating progress

As can readily be seen many of the tasks are the same as those of the leader. Indeed, this is one key to the measurement of a group's effectiveness — the degree to which members assume the various tasks of leadership. The group should be encouraged to share this leadership amongst all members and not become dependent upon the assigned discussion leader.

At various times in the life of a discussion group different members will play different roles. Thus, the leader should always steer clear of stereo-typing the group members. Many a good suggestion has been overlooked because the members feel that 'anything that comes from that buffoon may be funny but it's not helpful'.

The leader then should regard the discussion group as a "members' group" and encourage them to use it to achieve satisfaction.

Remember

the most important people in a discussion group are the members

- . the roles of members are ever changing but they should be encouraged to take on leadership
- . leadership cannot be given, it is only accepted

TECHNIQUES

‘You know my methods, Watson’

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*

To deal with discussion group techniques in less than a full book is to court disaster. They are not intended as substitutes for full and open discussion but only used in specific situations. Thus when listing several of these we can only add the warning — ‘handle with caution’.

The following list is not a complete one. It touches only on a few of the possible techniques that can be used in a discussion group and even then are only lightly dealt with.

Voting

A vote in a discussion group runs a far distant second to reaching a consensus as a way of making a decision. A decision based on a 6-5 ratio has a split a group, perhaps needlessly.

A straw vote which indicates opinion and not a decision can sometimes be helpful to further discussion.

Brainstorming

The technique of brainstorming is often useful if one wishes to get out a lot of ideas when there are many possible solutions or programs for a specific problem.

With this method the problem is posed and participants are given a specified amount of time (e.g. 4 minutes) to come out with all the

solutions they can think of. During this time no discussion is permitted on whether or not an idea is good or bad. The ideas are listed and form the basis for the discussion which follows.

Role Playing

There are many variations of role playing that can be used in a discussion group. If you are interested in further information, your local library should have books and articles that deal with this topic.

Sub-Group Discussion

If there is one point that is to be discussed in detail and a definite conclusion drawn it is sometimes possible to split up the discussion group into smaller units for a limited period of time. After this is finished they report back to the larger discussion group.

Visual Aids

It is very helpful if a blackboard or sheets of newsprint are available for the group use.

If a discussion leader is interested in learning about his craft there are a variety of books on the subject that deal much more extensively with techniques. The bibliography to this booklet lists some and the library will have many more.

Remember

- . techniques are no substitute for sound discussion
- . they are used to add an extra dimension

AT THE END

'This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning'.

Winston Churchill

Since a discussion group does not exist in a vacuum it is necessary that we know to what end the conclusions of the group will be

used. If these conclusions were valid then they must be of some use.

A discussion group has usually been spun off of a larger forum and has to report to this group. Depending on what has been requested of the group, this can be an important part of the discussion.

Sometimes groups are asked to bring in recommended programs or solutions. If this is the case, time should be taken in the group to get agreement as to what these recommendations are to be and what is to be said. Unless this is done the group is often surprised to hear their representative give a report that sounds nothing like what they remember went on.

If the group has been asked to come up with questions to be used in the larger session they should agree on what questions are to be asked and in what order. Then if time runs out before all the questions have been answered the most important ones will have been asked.

If at all possible a report of the proceedings of the group should be given to the members as soon as possible after the meeting is over. It will serve to refresh their memory of what went on and to remind them of further action to be taken.

If the group has agreed to take further action then some members should be assigned the necessary responsibilities before the meeting ends. Otherwise, it becomes much more difficult to get people to take action because it is not as fresh in their mind and the degree of commitment to decisions decreases.

Remember

- agreements as to future action should be reached and understood by all participants before the group adjourns.

CONCLUSION

We have briefly glanced at the discussion group and your role as its leader. Without wishing to get more involved in the limited space

we have available perhaps we should sum up by saying that the discussion leader has to be in a position to acquire three things:

- knowledge
- experience
- understanding

In this paper we have tried to provide an opportunity for you to gain some **knowledge** of the group process and group leadership techniques. It is by no means complete but we hope that you have learned something that will be helpful to you in your discussion group.

As you become involved in discussions you will gain the **experience** in helping people to achieve effective group decisions.

Understanding can only come about through your own effort. You must believe in people and in their ability to achieve sound decisions through the discussion group process. If this is not acquired all the rest is game playing.

We started with a warning, now let us end with one. This booklet is merely a tool and if it appears you are going to be called upon to play a different role than the one described herein to help the group members achieve their objectives then the book goes out the window. This is not intended to be your bible.

APPENDIX

FUNCTIONAL ROLES AND NON-FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR

Reprinted from ADULT LEADERSHIP
'tool kit' of January 1953

ADULT LEADERSHIP
is a publication of the
Adult Education Association of the
U.S.A.

Here is a glossary of some of the most essential **functional roles** of group members.

Task Roles (functions required in selecting and carrying out a group task)

Initiating activity: proposing solutions; suggesting new ideas, new definitions of the problem, new attack on problem or new organization of material.

Seeking information: asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information or facts.

Seeking opinion: looking for an expression of feeling about something from the members, seeking clarification of values, or suggestions or ideas.

Giving information: offering facts or generalizations, relating one's own experience to group problem to illustrate a point.

Giving opinion: stating an opinion or belief concerning a suggestion or one of several suggestions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis.

Elaborating: clarifying, giving examples or developing meanings, trying to envision how a proposal might work out if adopted.

Co-ordinating: showing relationships among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various sub-groups or members.

Summarizing: pulling together related ideas or suggestions, re-stating suggestions after the group has discussed them.

Testing feasibility: making application of suggestions to real situations, examining practicality and workability of ideas, pre-evaluating decisions.

Group Building and Maintenance Roles (functions required in strengthening and maintaining group life and activities)

Encouraging: being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting contributions of others.

Gate keeping: trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, 'We haven't heard anything from Jim, yet,' or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard.

Standard setting: expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures, or in evaluating its decisions; reminding the group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.

Following: going along with the decisions of the group, somewhat passively accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussions and decision-making.

Expressing group feelings: summarizing what the group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions.

Both Group Task and Group Maintenance Roles

Evaluating: submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.

Diagnosing:	determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, the main blocks to progress.
Testing for consensus:	tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out if the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test group opinions.
Mediating:	harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.
Relieving tension:	draining off negative feeling by testing or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in a wider context.

From time to time – more often perhaps than anyone likes to admit – people behave in NON-FUNCTIONAL ways that do not help and sometimes actually harm the group and the work it is trying to do. Some of the more common types of non-functional behaviour are described below.

Note: In using a classification like the one above, people need to guard against the tendency to blame any person (whether themselves or another) who falls into “non-functional” behaviour. It is more useful to regard such behaviour as a symptom that all is not well with the group’s ability to satisfy individual needs through group-centred activity. Further, people need to be alert to the fact that each person is likely to interpret such behaviour differently. For example, what appears as “blocking” to one person may appear to another as a needed effort to “test feasibility”.

Types of Non-functional Behaviour

Being aggressive:	working for status by criticizing or blaming others, showing hostility against the group or some individual, deflating the ego or status of others.
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Blocking:	interfering with the progress of the group by going off on a tangent, citing personal experiences unrelated to the problem arguing too much on a point, rejecting ideas without consideration.
Self-confessing:	using the group as a sounding board, expressing personal, non-group-oriented feelings or points of view.
Competing:	vying with others to produce the best idea, talk the most, play the most roles, gain favour with the leader.
Seeking sympathy:	trying to induce other group members TO BE SYMPATHETIC to one's problems or misfortunes, deploring one's own situation or disparaging one's own ideas to gain support.
Special pleading:	introducing or supporting suggestions related to one's own pet concerns or philosophies, lobbying.
Horsing around:	clowning, joking, mimicking, disrupting the work of the group.
Seeking recognition:	attempting to call attention to one's self by loud or excessive talking, extreme ideas, unusual behaviour.
Withdrawing:	acting indifferent or passive, resorting to excessive formality, daydreaming, doodling, whispering to others, wandering from the subject.

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